# World Chronicle

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**GUEST:** Ambassador Bagher Asadi
Chairman
Group of 77

**JOURNALIST:** Bill Reilly, United Press International
Betsy Pisik, The Washington Times

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**THE GROUP OF 77**

Established in 1964, the Group of 77 is the largest coalition of developing countries. The 133-member group, a forum for developing countries to promote their collective interests, meets annually on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly to discuss international economic developments and the Group's activities. In this edition of **World Chronicle,** Ambassador Bagher Asadi, Chairman of the Group of 77, talks about trade and other socio-economic issues affecting developing countries.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

As the largest coalition of developing countries, the Group of 77, or G-77 as it is known provides the means for the developing world to articulate and promote its collective economic interests. Now, with a membership of 133 countries, the G-77 promotes the joint negotiating capacity of countries of the South on all major international economic issues. The G-77 is an engine in the UN system to further South-South cooperation.

Our guest today is the Chairman of the Group of 77, Ambassador Bagher Asadi of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Joining me to talk with Ambassador Asadi are Bill Reilly of *United Press International* and Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times*.

Ambassador Asadi, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

Ambassador, you started out with 77 members now you have 133, does that mean that you've not been very successful? I mean there are more developing countries than there were at the start, or is it simply a technical thing that there's been this increase?

**ASADI:** Well, thank you very much Mr. Littlejohns and in fact what you said in your introducing remarks, put it in a nutshell, all that the Group stands for. But as far as for the number on June 15th, 1964, at the very end of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development that is called UNCTAD, the Group was established. At the time 77 members of the developing community joined that new body but then, over time, other developing countries joined the Group. They were out there. They did not join on that day. And there were also others who did not have independent status at the time.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** They were not independent states. They were colonies ...

**ASADI:** Some were, exactly, not independent. And I just want to say that the official name of the Group is Group of 77 but China is also one of our members. So in our statements and in our provisions we refer to G-77 and China, although the official name is G-77.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** How can a vast country like China with heavy industry, quote pose unquote as a developing country?

**ASADI:** Well, they consider themselves a developing country but again, as you might know, among the 133 members of the group there is not a unique level or the same level of

development. It is quite a diverse group with quite varied stages of development ranging from China to small islands of, I don't know, around 100,000 population.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But I think most people, Ambassador, would regard China as a developed country. I mean here in New York you can hardly pick up an item in a store without seeing "Made in China". I mean it's a very...

**ASADI:** That is due to the globalizing nature of our world but I suppose overall China considers herself as a developing country and we are terribly happy to have China with us.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** What is the minimum requirement to be considered developing?

**ASADI:** It's difficult to say to be honest with you. We've never thought exactly to put it in writing or figure in precise figures what constitutes as a...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Gross national product? Something like that?

**ASADI:** Along those lines I suppose, perhaps, when you talk about China whether China is to be considered a developing or a developed. The same could be said about a number of other members of the developing world but, over time, have been in the group and have a say in the Group. And there are only a few members who have graduated and left our ranks. For example, the Republic of Korea was with us up to a number of years back and now part of OECD. Mexico was a member of the Group. Now, again, with OECD although they consider themselves one of us Ithough not in a legal sense.

**REILLY:** Along those same lines, Michael mentioned in his introduction the G-77 being an engine in the UN system to further South-South cooperation. Well, if you're a developing nation doesn't it have enough trouble helping itself pull up its socks and get rolling or how can you help each other?

**ASADI:** Well, South-South cooperation in fact has been one of the mechanisms for achieving development in our collective common effort because our activities, one that Mr. Littlejohns referred to as the negotiating forum for the developing world on a wide range of major economic and development issues on the international agenda, that is the deliberative aspect of the G-77. The other aspect is how to promote cooperation among ourselves in various areas – economic as well as technical areas -- though you have developing countries which can engage, can interact with each other on this wide range of areas and they have comparative advantage in areas which they can share. At the same time, along with and in parallel with South-South cooperation, then you have North-South dialogue and cooperation. You may not have let's say

advance technology to trade with the developed world but as Mr. Littlejohns referred to, for example, textile or other products that are produced in the developing world and are needed in the developed world. The same thing, on a wide range of issues, services and agricultural products, you can do it with the developed world as much as you can do it with your developing fellow country.

**PISIK:** You had mentioned earlier that Mexico and the ROK had, in a sense, graduated out of the G-77. I'm wondering are there any others that have done so or is this even – could be a called a goal of that?

**ASADI:** Well so far, in recent years, we have had some members among the newly independent states – members of CIS or previous republic of the USSR...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Commonwealth of Independent States.

**ASADI:** ...who have joined us. That is why the number has increased in recent years. And, as I said, there have been few graduations. You might have some of our members who are much higher in the stage of development than others but nevertheless they prefer to stay with us simply because to be part of the group gives you an edge in collective bargaining power. That is the exact rationale and raison d'être for joining the Group and remaining with the Group.

**PISIK:** Who are some of these other members that are more well off? I mean I can think of economies such as Singapore, for example, which has a per capita that rivals any European country. Are there others as well?

**ASADI:** I suppose there are. In certain respects you have India is well advanced in certain areas, you have Brazil, you have Argentina, you have, I suppose, some African countries, you have South Africa. In certain areas they are advanced and quite a number of them. Middle-sized economies generally you can find them in Latin America, in Africa, as well as in Asia. For example, Iran itself is a middle-sized developing economy but then while talking about the developing countries I just want to say that I refer to the diversity. The diversity includes, for example, 49 countries which are considered Least Developed Countries for which back in mid-May there was the United Nations Conference, the third LDC. So they are part of the community. Then you have Small Island Developing Countries which are, again, another constituency of the developing world. Then you have such huge economies as China and India, the two biggest in the world. So it's quite diverse. But nevertheless all of them are part of the bigger G-77 developing community.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But Ambassador, given this diversity it's hard to believe that you can be one big happy family. You must be pulling in different directions according to your stage of development?

**ASADI:** Well, I can tell you one thing that has been very dear to us and has served us well is the democratic nature of the grouping in the sense that we have made all our decisions over the past 37 years of our existence through consensus. And, in fact, consensus-building is one of not only the working principles, the most fundamental working principle of the group, as well as one of the cherished objectives of the Group. And that is how we have survived despite the fact that this group does not have a permanent secretary, does not have written rules of procedures, does not have administrative services, does not have a constitution as such but nevertheless it is... On the way here one of my colleagues said G-77 is a state of mind and that's true. And it is that consensus-building objective that has kept us with each other and keeps us going. And in fact the diversity that you refer to is both a source of strength as well as a challenge. I just wanted to say that in our working procedures on any issue, first we sit down among ourselves and come up with a common position. That common position could be either presented in the form of a common statement by the Group or in a negotiating position. Then you go into the plenary, comprising of the whole membership of the United Nations, and then again come back to the G-77 to liaise with each other in order to take into consideration the stage of negotiations. And there is a dynamism that goes on. So that's how it works.

**REILLY:** Along that same line, in taking positions how frequently do you take political positions, or do you?

**ASADI:** What exactly do you mean political position? Because any decision that we make, any position that we take has an element of politics in it. You make a position, you take it, then you say, I support this – for example, a new structure for a new international financial structure. That is a political prosition that you take but not particularly as far as let's say peace matters are confirmed. We do not deal with those matters, rather with development issues and the major international economic issues. That is our purview.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ambassador Bagher Asadi of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Chairman of the Group of 77.

**REILLY:** I wanted ask about the position the Group of 77 took during the Human Settlements Special Session of the General Assembly this past summer. I believe there was some

wording in the final declaration against illegal settlements and I believe you were active in campaigning against some of that language.

**ASADI:** I was personally active in the last hours of that conference on how to work out the consensus language preventing a vote to be taken on some of the paragraphs which were contested, which proved to be controversial. And at the end of the day -- of course I should say in the early hours of the morning, about four in the morning – we reached agreement, consensual agreement, on the outstanding paragraph. But then that was not a particularly political question, rather a question related to settlements, the very crux of the Habitat + 5 review conference and not in its political aspect. Of course, it turned out to have certain political implications which we did not deal with as such, rather we dealt with the relevance of the issue of settlements – illegal settlements. And I'm terribly happy to say that we reached consensus.

**PISIK:** You mentioned that this is as such a political position that was taken but in terms of the illegal settlements, that would be regarding Israel. Would that be right?

**ASADI:** Well, I suppose at that time the issue yes turned out to be a Palestinian-Israeli question.

**PISIK:** Did it apply to other settlement issues as well specifically that you could mention?

**ASADI:** I suppose at that moment when the discussion was going on only certain parties were involved in the discussion in the conference room. It came to be known as the Palestinian paragraph.

**PISIK:** Would that be incorrect, though? Does it apply to other illicit settlements as well?

**ASADI:** Well, I suppose it should apply to any illegal settlement activity anywhere in the world but at that particular moment the example seemed to refer to a particular situation.

**PISIK:** It seems as though very often the G-77 is responsible for adding or advocating language that is expressly aimed at Israel, not just in the question of human settlements but in other documents as well – UN declarations. And sometimes, even in the Security Council, through various affiliates, the NAM, for example, which is more the political side than more the economic side ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The Non-Aligned Movement.

**PISIK:** The Non-Aligned Movement, pardon my jargon. So what I'm wondering is it seems like this is happening quite a bit and I'm wondering if this is actually more of an irritant or more than an issue to continually be bringing this out? It seems as though there might be consensus within the G-77 about this issue but within the larger UN often less so.

**ASADI:** Rarely do we happen to come across such incentive as in the Habitat + 5 Conference. In the Non-Aligned Movement definitely, because they deal with political issues. Most of their issues are of a political nature although they deal with economic and social issues as well, but mainly the Non-Aligned Movement is of a political nature. And within the framework of NAM that question or similar questions come up. But in G-77 it's rather rare and in fact in all of the conferences that I have been dealing with over the past several years, not only as the chairman since January this year but as a G-77 activist, that's only quite a rare instance that came up.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ambassador, most recently there was a conference in your capital, Teheran, can you tell us something about how this developed in terms of so-called South-South cooperation?

**ASADI:** Yes, indeed. The conference that took place in Teheran between the 18th and 23rd of August was the tenth meeting of the inter-governmental follow up and coordination committee on economic cooperation among developing countries, and that is a mechanism established on the basis of the Caracas Programme of Action, a programme of action which was adopted by the Group of 77 back in 1981. And this was the tenth meeting in that series. But this time it took place after the first South Summit that was held in Cuba in April 2000 which had the Havana Declaration encompassing the long-term vision of the G-77, of the developing world, in the face of the globalizing situation that we face in the bigger world, and also containing our strategy of how to address the problems we have in terms of our on-going quest for achieving development. In addition to that, a programme of action – the Havana Programme of Action – was adopted at the Conference, which needed to be followed up and implemented. And in fact, here in New York, we have had an open-ended working group to operationalize the provisions of that Havana Programme of Action. The meeting in Teheran dealt in particular with how far we have advanced in operationalizing the programme of action from the South Summit and, of course, it reviewed the activities of the committee over the past few years. The Committee last met in 1996. It's supposed to meet on a biennial basis but it had not. So between '96 and 2001 we did

not have the committee meeting so we had five years. And it was quite a wide range of issues that we dealt with in Teheran and I consider it a very successful meeting.

**REILLY:** Ambassador, I mentioned to a colleague that I was about to speak with you here today and I said, "You are with G-77?" Then they said, "Oh, they are the ones who are working on forestry" and that took me aback a bit, but can you explain what the G-77's role is in reforestation and forestry?

**ASADI:** Well, again, forests is one of the important issues on the sustainable development agenda and it has been with the international community and the developing world for quite some time. At least, we have been talking about the area since the Stockholm Conference in 1972 and then 20 years later in Rio when there was the environment and development conference – the Rio Conference – Rio Summit. And from then on the issue of forests has been an important agenda item in the sustainable development dialogue in the international scene. And for us in the developing community, in G-77, it is an important area and like the rest of the international community we are comprised of two sets of countries as far as forests are concerned: rich, forested countries and low-forested countries. Low-forest covered countries or forested countries. Iran is among the low-forest covered countries. Of over 190 countries in the world only a minority are heavily forested countries and perhaps one could say almost over 100 are low forest covered countries. So they have limited forest cover. Preserving that forest cover is very important to them and expanding it is, of course, their challenge and their objective. Iran has been active in the forest negotiations for the past several years and, myself personally, I have been involved in the international dialogue – policy dialogue -- at the United Nations during the intergovernmental forum on forest process between 1997 and 2000. So that is why when the question of forests comes up the name of Iran and the co-chair comes up as well. That's just in a nutshell.

**PISIK:** Pursuant to that, the umbrella over the G-77 is economic development and primarily economic issues and cooperation. Within that, can you identify a couple of key issues that the Group is looking at here in the UN that would assists the South?

**ASADI:** I suppose the most important process that I could refer to this year in 2001 is the International Conference on Financing for Development which will come up in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002. That is a few months down the road. That, I consider the most important. Another one, again, we are going through the preparatory process for is the World Summit on

Sustainable Development which is coming up in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2002, exactly ten years after the Rio and that is called also Rio + 10 Conference. These are the two important conferences for which we are going through the preparatory process. But then during 2001 we have had a number of important conferences. One of them I referred to, the LDC III, the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, we had the Habitat + 5, to which we referred, we had the Special Session of the General Assembly for HIV/AIDS which was held at the end of June, and we also had the Racism Conference in Durban, South Africa in early September. So these were some of the important gatherings, international conferences, that we have been dealing with and we will be dealing with the other two that I referred in 2002.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ambassador, we have only a few seconds left, but would you say that in appraising the G-77, and particularly during your period as Chairman, that this is one of the success stories that you achieved the targets that you set out for yourselves?

**ASADI:** I suppose I could say that with great certitude, yes.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So the whole idea of a G-77 back in 1964 has really proved to be a wise move?

**ASADI:** And a continuing success.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Ambassador, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ambassador Bagher Asadi of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Chairman of the Group of 77 Developing Countries. He was interviewed by Bill Reilly of *United Press International* and Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

**ANNOUNCER:** Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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